

Testimony of Rosa Soto-Thomas

Good afternoon Mr. Sablan and other members of this subcommittee. My name is Rosa Soto-Thomas, and I am president of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 1826, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. I represent teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff. We serve approximately 10,000 students in the St. Croix School District. Our public school system is comprised of two high schools, three junior high schools and eight elementary schools.

On Sept. 19, 2017, Hurricane Maria ravaged the island of St. Croix causing significant damage to our infrastructure. Many citizens lost or suffered severe damages to their homes and other personal property.

The Virgin Islands Public School System sustained tremendous damages and is still in a state of disrepair. Arthur A. Richards, one of three junior high schools on the island, was entirely condemned by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and is slated for a complete rebuild in St. Croix. Julius E. Sprauve K-8 School on St. John is scheduled for rebuild as well.

Many schools are being housed in temporary facilities—which presents its own set of challenges. Lew Muckle and Pearl B. Larsen Schools have gotten some modular structures to replace condemned spaces and classrooms. Addilita Cancryn Jr. High School on St. Thomas is currently housed on a football field of Charlotte Amalie High School, which has negatively impacted the school's recreation and athletic programs.

And modular facilities were recently constructed at the Arthur Richards Jr. High School. Unfortunately, Alexander Henderson Elementary School had to be abruptly closed in April 2019, and is now housed within the

Arthur Richards site. Consequently, two schools are currently occupying this completely modular site. Thus this school is obviously over crowded over and has scaled back programs due to lack of sufficient classroom space. One major problem with the modular is there are no awnings or shelter space to traverse during inclement weather.

The western wing of the Eulalie Rivera Elementary School in Grove Place was totally destroyed and has since been condemned along with the administrative building. Modular structures have been erected to replace the demolished classrooms. The condemned structure of the most westerly wing on site remains untouched surrounded by chain - linked fencing.

Recently, a wall at Lew Muckle Elementary School that housed six second and third grade classrooms partially collapsed causing school officials to reassign teachers and students to classrooms which were out of commission. Thank God that none of our students or teachers were injured. To date, nothing has been repaired and seemingly no plans to do so exist.

Both of our island's high schools, St. Croix Central High School and the St. Croix Educational Complex High School are in dire straits. Very little has happened to repair these schools. These school are currently preparing for an accreditation visit by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. If permanent repairs are not executed, both high schools on the island of St. Croix will likely lose accreditation.

The air conditioning unit in our Career and Technical Education Center has been down for quite some time. The building leaks and has mold. We are concerned that students and school employees continue to get

sick. Many instructors are slated to retire from our only vocational facility on the island of St. Croix.

We are essentially at a stand-still regarding any pending permanent repairs by FEMA. Repeated damage assessment of our schools and facilities have been executed by many government official and agencies and yet no concrete plans have been employed to begin to permanently fix our hurricane ravaged schools and facilities. More than a year and eight months after the hurricanes, many of our educators continue to suffer from respiratory ailments related to mold and poor air-quality in our schools and activity centers.

Additionally, there is no drinking water in any of our public schools. And the public water system dispenses rusted and discolored water daily. We are currently experiencing increased warm temperatures and our students and members need to be hydrated to focus on their teaching and learning.

At this phase, the Virgin Islands Department of Education has not released its summer maintenance plan to shore-up our schools. The question begs, where is the Virgin Islands Department of Education and FEMA with the permanent repair plans?

At this juncture, AFT members are most concerned about permanent repairs of our schools being done. No definitive plans to complete permanent repairs have been unveiled to the union or community.

Access to technology in the Virgin Islands is very limited. Most school programs are either impacted daily by intermittent service or no services at all. Both our educators and students rely heavily on the internet to complete their work.

To date, our members continue to experience a slew of medical symptoms including PTSD. This was discovered by the recent visit of volunteer AFT nurses to the Virgin Islands performing hearing and vision screening.

In many instance there is lack of security. As recent as last week, two schools were vandalized forcing school closure for the day. Many classrooms throughout all schools do not have desks or chairs for children or teachers, or book cubicles or storage closets.

How can Congress help us? We need a disaster recovery plan that enlists the assistance of experts as well as our entire community. We need definitive plans for the reconstruction of our schools. We need better communication and updates of how were moving alone. We need less red tape with accountability of those responsible for overseeing the new development and rebuilding of the Virgin Islands.

Thank you for having me here to represent the citizens of St. Croix. I look forward to answering your questions.